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Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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On Building a Healthy Ecosystem in Community

*by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General
4.VI.2001*

High above the mountain ranges of the Western United States glides the California condor, the largest bird in North America, with a wingspan of nine feet. It soars to an altitude of three miles, swooping down from time to time to feed on red meat and salmon with a healthy appetite. With its black body, bare head and red knees, this majestic bird has flown through the mountains and valleys of California, Nevada and Arizona for millennia. But by 1990 only 23 remained in existence, 6 in California and 17 near the Grand Canyon in Arizona. It was an endangered species.

Every species needs its own peculiar ecological system in order to survive. When that system is rich, the species thrives. As its ecosystem deteriorates, the species gradually diminishes and, in the worst cases, finally becomes extinct. Millions of species that once inhabited the planet earth are now extinct. So too will it be one day for the human race. Will its ecosystem be destroyed by a violent cataclysm of human making, a massive bomb? Will it be destroyed when a giant asteroid crashes into the planet? Will it be destroyed because a polluted environment gradually suffocates the human person? Who knows?

And religious life? Life in the Congregation of the Mission? Nature teaches us the simple lesson that we will grow and flourish only to the extent that the ecosystem created by St. Vincent 376 years ago and renewed from time to time in our history is vibrant. Otherwise we will decline and perhaps one day even disappear.

A. The Theme of this Meeting

The theme of this meeting is “Animating Local Communities.” To animate means to give life, breath, soul, spirit. The Lord calls each of us here today to be an animator — me and the members of the General Curia, on the level of the worldwide Congregation; you who are Visitors, in your provinces — and he calls each of the local superiors in each of our houses to be an animator of the men with whom he lives. This is no easy task. In fact, it is an enormous challenge. Two pieces of data highlight for me the critical nature and the magnitude of this challenge; one is existential, the other juridical.

The existential datum. About 300 confreres between the ages of 35 and 50 have now passed through the three-month Vincentian Ongoing Formation program at CIF in Paris. Fr. John Rybolt, who has been in charge of the program from the beginning, has often told me that the concern most frequently expressed by these confreres is an uneasiness about community living. They sense that something is lacking in our life together. In the last three decades, most of our provinces have taken significant steps forward in the renewal of our apostolic life. Little by little the Congregation has focused more clearly on the poor and on our missionary nature. But many in the CIF program ask: Have we found the right formula for our life together? Does community provide the faith-support, the solidarity in action, the encouragement, the understanding, the home that so many today — especially the young — seek when they join an apostolic society? This uneasiness, expressed by so many confreres, is the challenging existential datum that I place before you today.

The second datum is juridical and it too is enormously challenging. Article 129 of our Constitutions states this: “The Congregation forms itself particularly in the individual local communities.” That is where the Congregation really lives and grows — in the local community. That is where we are either happy or unhappy. That is where we either pray or do not pray. That is where we either feel support or do not feel it. That is where we either enjoy one another’s company or flee from it. That is where we either plan and act in solidarity in serving the poor or merely park for the night at a convenient motel in order to go out again in the morning as a lone-ranger-type apostle. This juridical datum raises the urgent question: Can we make the local community a healthy ecosystem where confreres live, grow and thrive?

But there is more to this second datum. The second paragraph of Article 129 states: “The superior, as the center of unity and animator of the life of the local community, should promote the ministries of the house and, with the community, should be concerned for the personal development and activity of each confrere.” This paragraph states how important the local superior’s role is. He is the center of unity. He is a key animator in the local community. Of course, he is not alone. Others share this responsibility too. But, if the superior is good at the job, the chances are that the local community will be very much alive. And if he is bad at it, the local community will have considerable difficulty finding the *anima*, the breath that it needs in order to live healthily.

B. My hopes for this Meeting

What do I hope for from this meeting?

I hope, first of all, that we can devise ways of helping local superiors build, with the confreres, an ecosystem where their communities will thrive.

Your provinces, of course, are different from one another; even within provinces, local communities are very varied. Some are large. Some are small. Some revolve around a single work. Some embrace multiple works. In my judgment, this meeting will be a success if we can put in the hands of local superiors, wherever they may be and whatever their houses may be like, tools that will help them construct a vibrant ecosystem in their local community.

That brings me to a critical problem and my second hope for this meeting. Our Constitutions (C. 27) and Statutes (S. 16) propose the community plan as the basic tool for structuring the life and activity of the local community. It is a covenant, so to speak, that we make with one another and in which we commit ourselves concretely to support each other in our apostolic labors, our life together, our prayer, our vows, our ongoing education, and in many other ways. But I have the impression — and this is the problem — that many local communities do not take the formulation, evaluation, and regular revision of the community plan seriously. During the visits that the Assistants General and I make to the provinces, we often note that local community plans are badly made or are merely an order of day. This is also one of the most frequent comments that you as Visitors make in the reports you send me about your visits to local houses. So, a second concrete result that I hope will issue from this meeting is this: that all of *us*, on the general level and on the provincial level, will take local community planning seriously and that we will help local superiors to do so too.

A third hope. Would it be possible for us to envision “A Practical Guide for Local Superiors” similar to the *Practical Guide for the Visitor*? Would it be possible to present in the Guide various models for community plans: for large communities, for small communities, for communities engaged in a single work, for communities engaged in dispersed works? Could such a “Practical Guide” offer guidelines to help superiors accompany the confreres, questions to pose when meeting with each one individually a few times a year and listening to his concerns? I would be very interested in discussing this possibility during our time here.

Over the last several years I have written three articles on the local community and local community planning. The most recent of these discusses various models of community. You will find it in your folder either in English, French, or Spanish. I ask you to read it in these days. It comes to about 15 pages. I hope that it will stimulate some thoughts for discussion during these days.

C. Five Community Moments

It is always important to speak about community concretely. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: "The person who loves his dream of community more than the real community itself destroys community."¹

Community exists when we live it concretely and vitally. Let me dwell briefly on five significant elements in the ecosystem of community living. They are, so to speak, the air, the water, the sun, the fire, the soil of local communities.

1. *Meals*

It might seem strange that I begin with eating, though of course the principal communal act that Jesus left his followers was precisely a meal. My focus, however, is not on food (though St. Vincent did encourage treasurers to serve good wine and good bread²). My focus is on common meals as one of the primary signs of union. When asked what are the most striking memories of their families, countless people respond by describing long festive dinners at Christmas or Easter in which people sat around the table telling stories, or a time together on vacation where everyone ate together, and relaxed, sang, played games, and talked until late into the night. Of course, not every meal can be that way. But meals are a prime time for good human communication. They are times when our tradition is deepened because we recall stories from the past and speak of wonderful men and women whom we have known. They are a time when that tradition is developed because new people express new insights and new ways of responding to the same values in the service of the poor.

Decades ago, reading at table occupied us during meals. Today meals are an opportunity for genuine, interested table-talk. But at times communities eat rapidly, with sparse conversation. In some houses, it is hard to get everyone together even for a single meal a day.

Crucial in the human conversation that characterizes meals is attentive listening. We must be deeply interested in one another, in our backgrounds, our histories, our gifts, the projects that set us on fire. Few things are worse than having an exciting experience to relate, bringing it up at table, and finding that no one seems eager to hear it. I regret to say that this often happens. A few weeks ago I found myself agitated by what I perceived to be an injustice done to a priest by a bishop. I tried to tell my story to two people. Both were preoccupied with other things that day. When I was a short way into my story, each interrupted me to tell me his own story. In the end, I concluded that it was my turn to listen, but I never got my story out that day.

¹D. Bonhoeffer. *Life Together* (London, 1954) 15.

²SV III, 505.

Of course, the Eucharistic meal plays a most significant role in our lives. It is a time for attentive listening to the word of God, for genuine sharing in faith, and for union in the life of the Lord. Some of my striking memories in community have been wonderful Eucharistic celebrations. That brings me to the second community moment.

2. Prayer

Here let me mention three distinctive moments.

a. Our common liturgical prayer. It is very important that it be prepared well and celebrated beautifully and meditatively. If so, it can be a most significant means of our contact with God, with one another, and with young people who hunger to pray with us. It can be a time when we cry out:

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to make music to your name, O most High,
to proclaim your love in the morning
and your truth in the watches of the night.³*

b. Faith sharing. This is one of the contemporary forms that the traditional “repetition of prayer” is taking.⁴ It can be a powerful moment in building community if the members are capable of sharing their faith with great simplicity. Faith sharing is not meant to be a homily prepared ahead of time, nor is it meant to be a catharsis for releasing one's pent-up anxieties, but rather it is a spontaneous expression of our hopes, our doubts, our joys, our pain as we live and pray before the Lord. If we wrestle with life and share with one another to make sense of who we are and what we are called to in the light of the gospel, I am confident that we will come to know and appreciate one another in a much deeper way.

c. Mental prayer. Mental prayer can seem a rather solitary exercise, but as Vincentians we promise to engage in it *together* in order to support one another in reflecting on God's word and in contemplating his presence. Personally, I sense that support very much, I am encouraged when I find myself meditating with my brothers. Conversely, I am quite discouraged when I find myself alone in the chapel, wondering where everybody else is. If the liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed,”⁵ mental prayer is one of the key foundation stones. It nourishes and strengthens our faith. It is important,

³Ps 92:2-3.

⁴C 46

⁵*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10.

therefore, that the members of local communities encourage each other in meditating.

Often, in small communities, confreres say that it is almost impossible for them to pray together because of their fewness in number and their multiple works. I am very much in disagreement with that conclusion. I realize, of course, that the prayer of a small community cannot be the same as that of a large community. But even in small communities, we must pray together. If we do not find the time to do so, we are lost.

3. *Fun*

If prayer is the human heart searching for God, humor helps us to realize that God is unpredictable, as are most of us, his creatures!

Humor is linked to our perception of incongruity. There is lots that is incongruous in our lives, if only we can see it with a little bit of distance.

It is very important to have fun in community. Fun fosters harmony by preventing us from being overly serious about ourselves. Just as it is important that the community work together, so also it is important that it relax together and laugh from time to time, that we enjoy one another's company. In that way, we will see different aspects of each other's personality too.

Aquinas says a striking thing about playfulness: "Unmitigated seriousness betokens a lack of virtue, because it wholly despises play which is as necessary for a good human life as is rest."⁶ You remember, I am sure, the letter in which St. Vincent told St. Louise to lighten up and have some fun when she was in the company of the good-humored Madame Goussault.⁷

A local community should be creative in organizing times of diversion. I lived in a house where once a week, at night, we watched a videotape of a movie together. Actually, we now do this from time to time in the General Curia. We agreed on the film ahead of time. Somebody prepared a few snacks, and we sat around and talked about it afterwards. I loved it, and so did everybody else. Nobody had to come, but everybody did.

I lived in a community in Panama where we came together every Monday in order to pray together, to have a meeting, and then to enjoy the rest of the day in one another's company. Almost nobody on the mission ever missed that day.

⁶*Nicomachean Ethics*, iv ib 854.

⁷SV I, 502.

There are many other possibilities, but it is very important that we enjoy each other's company, laugh, relax, and at times simply have fun.

4. Meetings

Even though meetings are sometimes a scourge in our lives, or as I have suggested elsewhere, one of the contemporary forms of mortification, nonetheless, they are a very important community moment. They are a time when much important communication takes place. They should be a moment in which everyone feels included, in which people feel a common responsibility for the values being shared and the decisions being made.

I suggest that two meetings are of particular importance:

a. The meeting for formulating the local community plan.⁸ Unfortunately, as I have already mentioned, many houses still do this very poorly. They tend to make it more like an occasion for deciding on an order of day, rather than a time for creativity. They are slow to exercise the flexibility that the Constitutions and Statutes provide. But the meeting for formulating the local community plan can be precisely the time in which the ecosystem that I am describing can be created, developed, enriched, and covenanted. I encourage you as provincial leaders to make one of your priorities in the coming year assistance to local communities in developing their plans.

b. Meetings for evaluation or *revision de vie*.⁹ We seek ongoing communal conversion within community. Evaluation times give us an opportunity to reflect on our mission and on our lifestyle. It is important that we do this honestly and peacefully. Such meetings can be the time for many suggestions that can be helpful for the growth of a local community. The key point is often balance, the ability to integrate various values: mission, prayer, life together.

Essential in our lives is simple dialogue, the ability to draw out from others their feelings and thoughts, to pose helpful questions, to give one's own reaction without being either defensive or aggressive.

5. Apostolate

We are an apostolic *society*. Our apostolate, therefore, has a communal dimension. I encourage you to assist local superiors to plan in common with the confreres, to evaluate in common, and actually to animate the confreres to work

⁸C 27; S 16.

⁹C 2; 22, 27; S.16.

as a team in their apostolates as much as possible. There are few things that tie us together more than cooperating in an exciting common apostolic project. It is wonderful when, in a healthy sense, we are proud of what we do in a mission or in a seminary or in a parish or a soup kitchen or a social justice program.

There are many ways of showing apostolic solidarity. Do we listen to what our brothers have done during the day when, coming home tired, they want to chat with us in the evening? Do we let them share with us the challenges they meet in their apostolates? Do we pray for and with our brothers in their apostolates? Can our community truly be called an “apostolic *community*”? Or is it more a hotel? Common interest in the works in which each member of the local community is involved is a powerful unifying force.

A final word. Not every community will renew itself and attain the ideals envisioned by our Constitutions and Statutes or expressed at this meeting. A provincial and his council have the difficult task of working toward the gradual renewal of the local communities. As you do that, I ask you to assign younger confreres only to those communities that engage in a serious process of renewal. It is those communities that will carry the seeds for future Vincentian life. A province with three communities where the confreres live Vincentian life vitally has a real future. A province with 20 unrenewed communities where the confreres just survive is utterly stagnant. In fact, unless a province succeeds in building genuinely participative communities, it dies.

And the California condor? I am happy to report that in the last decade its number has increased from 23 to 120 (a good-sized province!). Those who love this majestic bird, recreated for it an ecosystem where it could live and even thrive. I hope we can do the same thing by building vibrant local Vincentian communities.

D. Questions for Reflection

1. What do you see as the greatest challenges today in animating the **local** communities in your province?
local communities in your province?
2. What are your concrete hopes for this meeting?
3. Are meals a time of genuine conversation in the houses of your province?
Is there good listening among the confreres? Are they present for meals?
4. How would you evaluate the communal prayer of the houses of your province?
Is it well prepared? beautiful? attractive to young people?
5. Do the confreres in the houses of your province enjoy each other's company?

Do they at times have fun together? Are they creative in organizing times of diversion?

6. Do the local communities of your province really work together in formulating their community plan? Are they faithful in living it out? Are your local superiors good at animating house meetings?
7. Do the confreres in the houses of your province work **together**, or is their style more that of a lone-ranger? Do confreres living in the same house but working in diverse apostolates show genuine interest in one another's works?